NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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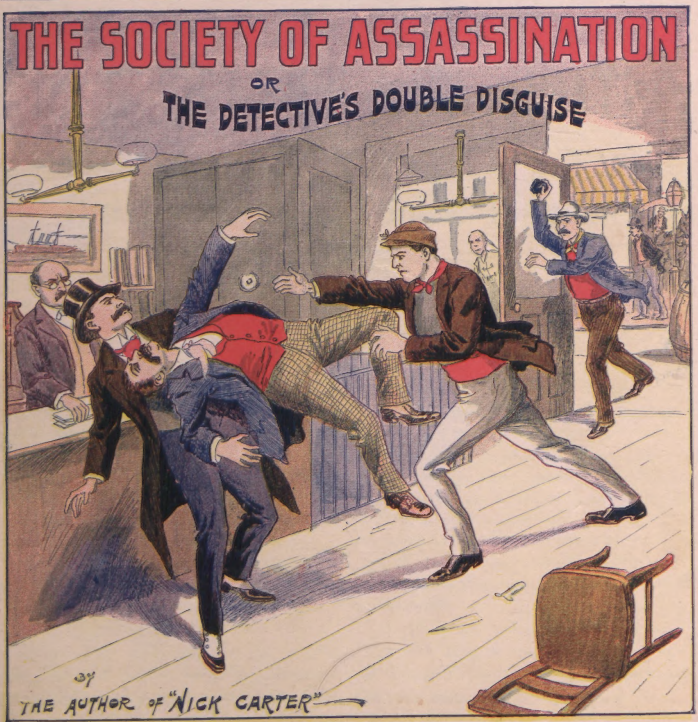
THE SOCIETY OF ASSASSINATION

OR THE DETECTIVE'S DOUBLE DISGUISE



BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

The foreigner, who believed himself to be a strong man, felt himself lifted like a child into the air, whirled for an instant over the head of the detective, and then hurled into the face of his friend.

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THE SOCIETY OF ASSASSINATION;

OR,

The Detective's Double Disguise.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE PRISONER'S ESCAPE.

Shortly after five o'clock in the morning, while a genuine autumn storm was raging outside, was when it happened.

It was in every respect, the most remarkable incident that had ever happened in or about police headquarters, and to this day the details of the affair remain a mystery.

And it is quite natural that the case should not be talked about, for the like of it had never been known before, and it is equally certain that the like of it could never happen the second time.

The facts as they occurred are these, and the reader must judge for himself how the entire police force of the city was paralyzed with astonishment at the daring and the audacity, and overwhelmed by the success of the schemers.

A double murder had been committed in a house on Madison Avenue in the city of New York.

The victims of the double crime were Attila Corazona, a beautiful young woman of Spanish descent, and her brother, and in working out the case according to his usual methods, Nick Carter had discovered that the young lady had been assassinated by her brother, who, in turn, was killed by one Antonio de la Vuelta.

And Vuelta, when captured, was discovered to be a raving maniac.

As such he was confined, for one night only, in police headquarters, it being the intention of the officials to have him duly committed to an institution for the insane on the following day.

The crazy man was seen, and while he was partially lucid had been interviewed in his padded cell by the detective accompanied by the inspector. The coroner, whose official duty it had been to be present at the scene of the crime in Madison Avenue, was also present at the time.

It was about midnight when the interview took place—at least, it was shortly after midnight when the three officials parted at the door of headquarters, and went their several ways, well satisfied with the work of the day.

And there, as each of them devoutly believed, closed the case of The House with the Open Door.

When the three men parted at the door, a violent storm, which had been brewing all through the day, had broken loose and was raging in terrific fury, so that each one hurried to his home and to that rest which had been so thoroughly earned by the labors of the day.

Now, it is a well-known fact that there is an hour in every day when vigilance, no matter how austere it may be as a rule, relaxes, and that hour is usually the second one after daylight.

The mystery of the night passes away with the darkness; eyes which have remained wide open and alert during the watches of the night, become heavy-lidded; the period of assertive watchfulness is past.

It is conceded by men who are on guard at that time, that the prowlers of the night have slunk away. The gray dawn of morning brings reassurance, and the rising of the sun dispels the last misgivings.

In the streets at that time it is supposed that only honest men, who toil, are abroad—that others who do not toil, but who procure their means of living by dishonest means, have crawled away out of the reach of the searching rays of the sun to hide their shame and their sins from the eye of man.

It is an hour, as I have said—that second one after daylight—when vigilance relaxes.

Police headquarters proved to be not an exception to that rule on this particular autumn morning, when the storm raged so violently that the newspapers devoted columns of space to descriptions of its ravages.

The sleepy sergeant on duty at the desk had peered out through the window at the driving rain until he was dizzy-headed. He had glanced three or four times along the top of the headlines of two of the morning papers, and had finally settled back in his chair and closed his eyes when he was roused by the telephone.

He did not need to leave his chair to respond to that call; in fact, he scarcely needed to alter his position at all, for the receiver hung upon the transmitter at his elbow, where it rested on the edge of the desk.

The telephone bell both disturbed and annoyed him, and he replied to it drowsily, and with a vague sulkiness.

"Hello!" said a voice to him over the phone.

"Hello!" he replied. "What is wanted?"

"Is that you, Fogarty?" asked the voice.

"Sure it's me. Who are you?" he inquired.

"The inspector."

"Sure, sir. I beg your pardon," said Fogarty, hastily. "I guess the storm is worrying the wires, for sure I didn't recognize your voice at all, at first."

"Do you recognize it now?"

"Sure I do. It's as natural as life."

"Good! I suppose everything is all right down there, eh?"

"Right as a trivet, sir. Nothing doing at all. It is one of the days, sir, when I'm glad that I'm on duty inside, instead of being out in the storm."

"Who is there with you, Fogarty."

"Well, sir, to tell you the truth, I let both the boys run out for a cup of coffee a minute ago, so it happens that there is nobody inside the office with me at this minute—but——"

"That's all right," interrupted the voice. "Has Sultzheimer arrived there yet?"

"Sure I don't know, sir. Who is Sultzheimer?"

"A patrolman from the forty-fourth."

"He hasn't got here yet, sir."

"Well, he should be there before long. I sent him, with two men in plain clothes, to get that bug we locked up yesterday afternoon."

"Oh! The chap with the Dago name who did that fine bit of butchering up on Madison Avenue?"

"Yes; he's in the padded cell."

"Sure. I know. Is Hockheimer coming after him?"

"The name is Sultzheimer—not Hockheimer. He's a Dutchman, and a good fellow. I have sent him, with two plain clothes men, after the bug. Mr. Carter and I have decided that we want him up here."

"All right, sir."

"Sultzheimer has full instructions, but I thought that you might not know him, and that I would telephone. Besides that, Fogarty——"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't make any unnecessary row about getting the man out of there, will you? You see—but you know your duty. I need not give you all these instructions. Just see that Sultz gets his man and brings him to me with as little delay as possible."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I'll do that, sure."

"He should be there by this time, or, at least, within a very few minutes."

"All right. I'll look out for him."

"Good-by," said the voice at the other end of the phone, and Serg. Fogarty hung up the receiver.

Instead of lying back in his chair and closing his eyes again, however, he rose from his chair and crossed to the window. For a moment he stood there looking out at the storm, and then he left the room and strolled out through the corridor to the front of the building, where the officer on duty was sitting huddled in his chair, half asleep.

The sergeant was on the point of addressing him and explaining to him the expected arrival of Officer Sultzheimer, when he heard a carriage roll up to the curb and stop, so he stepped through the doorway and peered through the driving storm at the officer who descended from the vehicle.

He noticed that he was followed by two men in plain clothes, and he at once leaped to the conclusion that this was the Sultzheimer whom he was expecting.

Now, Serg. Fogarty was an officer who boasted of his knowledge of the personnel of the force. He liked to have it thought that he was personally acquainted with every man who wore the brass buttons of a policeman in the city of New York, and it worried him to think that he had never heard of this man Sultzheimer, who seemed to be so high in the favor of his immediate chief, so he stepped forward into the rain and met the newcomer almost halfway on the steps.

"Is that you, Sultzheimer?" he inquired with easy familiarity. "I've been watching for you. The chief telephoned that you ought to have been here half an hour ago. You're after that Dago bug we've got downstairs, ain't you?"

"Yes," replied the supposed Sultzheimer. "The chief is in a hurry, too. Have you got the man ready for me?"

"Sure, Sultz, I only just got the order to let you have him."

"I thought you said it came half an hour ago," smiled Sultzheimer. They had passed inside the building by this time, past the sleepy sentinel at the door and were walking down the corridor followed by the two plain-clothes men.

"I was joshing you," said Fogarty. "I came out here to look for you as soon as I got the message, and had just got to the door when you drove up. Will you come into the private office a minute?"

"No. The boss is in a hurry. I'll take De la Vuelta away with me at once."

"Is that his name?"

"Yes. Where is he?"

"This way," replied Fogarty. "Come along."

While they were proceeding on their way to the cell where the crazed murderer was confined, the officer who called himself Sultzheimer drew nearer to Fogarty and slipped his arm familiarly through the sergeant's.

"I don't know who these two guys are, that I have brought with me," he said, in a tone which was intended to sound confidential. "The boss sent them, so they are all right. They are to take the bug from the cell for me. We have nothing to do but stand and look on, unless the bug proves too much for them, when we will lend a hand. Is this the cell?"

"Sure. That's it, and there is your bug, inside."

A man, huddled into a heap, was seated in one corner of the cell. He seemed to be asleep, and when, by Fo-

garty's order, the cell door was opened, he did not raise his head or show that he was aware of any intrusion.

The instant the door was opened, the two men in plain clothes stepped past the two officers into the cell.

One of them unrolled a large blanket which he had been carrying on his arm, and with a quick motion he threw it over the head of the apparently unconscious man in the corner.

As soon as the blanket fell into place, both men leaped forward together. They seized the human bundle roughly in their arms and lifted it from the floor, and while one of them held it firmly, the other quickly made use of some pieces of rope which he had evidently brought there for the purpose, and in an infinitely short space of time a roll which looked more like a bundle of bedding than anything else was tossed carelessly and roughly to the floor.

From the depths of the bundle faint moans could be heard, and there were several ineffectual attempts to struggle to liberty on the part of the captive; but the blanket and the ropes which held it impeded motion as well as shut off sound, and the two plain-clothes men lifted their burden from the floor and started away with it.

Neither of them had uttered a word.

In fact, the only words uttered after that, by any of the party, were by Serg. Fogarty himself, who had occasion only to say to two or three officers as they passed them, and who cast inquiring glances toward the bundle:

"It's all right. It's the bug. The chief sent for him."

And so the strange procession passed through the corridors to the street. The bundle of humanity was thrown roughly into the waiting hack, and the three men climbed in after it. Sultzheimer waved his hand in good-by to Fogarty, and Fogarty waved his in return.

It was not till ten o'clock that morning that Fogarty discovered that he had been deceived, and that he had assisted at the escape of a prisoner.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERY OF THE INSANE CRIMINAL.

It was half-past ten when Nick Carter received a short penciled note from the inspector which said, in effect, that he wished the detective would come to headquarters as soon as he conveniently could do so, because there had been a new development in the Madison Avenue case, which they had both considered closed.

The detective sought the office as soon as possible after that, and he found the inspector awaiting him in his private office.

"Well, Nick, what do you think now?" he inquired, smiling.

"Nothing especial. I'm waiting to be told," replied the detective.

"Did nobody tell you what has happened, while you were on your way here?" asked the inspector.

"No. I haven't heard a thing. I noticed an air of suppressed excitement about the corridor, that is all. One would suppose that the ardor of a police officer would be somewhat dampened by the fierceness of this storm, but it seems to have had the contrary effect upon your men."

"Humph!" said the inspector. Then, after a moment of silence, he added:

"Before I tell you what has happened, I wish you would answer a question or two for me."

"With pleasure, old fellow. What are they?"

"Were you convinced, last night, that my prisoner, De la Vuelta, was crazy?"

"Convinced? No; I did not take any measures to convince myself that he was, or was not, crazy. I took your word for it. You said he was crazy; that was all that I knew or cared about it."

"You thought he was crazy, didn't you?"

"Why, yes. He certainly acted crazy enough."

"Do you still think so?"

"I am not thinking anything about it. He is your prisoner, not mine."

"He isn't mine any more than he is yours; he is not anybody's prisoner, in fact."

"Eh? What is that?"

"He has escaped."

"Escaped!"

"Yes."

"Escaped from headquarters? From the padded cell? From this stronghold?"

Nick spoke as if he were amazed, as, indeed, he was, but he smiled in a manner that seemed to nettle the inspector, for he said, with some show of feeling.

"I can't be here all the time. It's a misfortune, I know, that I have to sleep, and that fools must be left in charge of things when I am away. There is one man on the police force who loses his shield to-day, that is certain."

"Who is that?" asked Nick.

"Fogarty," replied the inspector. "He didn't do a thing but go out in the rain to the very curbstone in order to receive, with every degree of distinction the three men who came here to rescue the prisoner. He received them there, he ushered them into the building, he conducted them to the cells, he opened the door of the padded cell for them, and he stood by and looked on while they made a bluff of throwing a blanket over the prisoner, tying him up with ropes and doing stunts of punching him and showing a lot of other little attentions of the same sort. Oh, it must have been fine."

"You amaze me," said Nick. "Why did Fogarty do all this? Or, rather, why did he permit it to be done?"

"Because he was loon enough to think that he had been talking with me over the phone, and that he was obeying my orders."

"Humph!" said Nick.

"Oh, you can 'humph' all you please; that doesn't catch that prisoner."

"No, that is true; it does not," assented the detective.

"Well, I want to tell you this. I would not have had that thing happen for the best ten-thousand-dollar bill that the government ever printed, and I'm going to catch that prisoner and bring him back here, if it takes the whole police force and every detective-at-large in the city to do it. His friends got away with him, but I don't propose to let them keep him. Nick, I don't believe that he was crazy at all."

"Perhaps not. I did not examine him, as you know. He was out of my jurisdiction, also, as you know. I will say this for him, however: If he was not crazy, he certainly played the part unusually well. Now, if you will tell me exactly how it all happened, we will try to get at the thing."

The inspector began at the beginning then, and related all that we already know of the occurences of the morning; and, in conclusion, he said:

"There, Nick, you know all that I know about it. Fogarty says that he did not at first suppose it was me on the phone, but after that he could have sworn that he recognized my voice."

"All of which goes to prove," said Nick, "that Fogarty is a very inefficient man. Is there a man by the name of Sultzheimer on the force? Is there such a name on the pay roll?"

"No; and there never has been. I have looked into that already."

"Then it is reasonably certain that the man who used the telephone was aware of Fogarty's weakness."

"What weakness?"

"Why, his pose of pretending that he is personally acquainted with every man who wears a blue uniform."

"Humph! What do you suppose the game to be, Nick?"

"What game?"

"Why, the whole game?"

"I don't think I am onto it yet, inspector," replied Nick, slowly. "It is a little mixed."

"Mixed! I should say so. Let me review the facts for you."

"Go ahead."

"Well, here they are. A woman sends for me. She tells me that her life is threatened by a man who has just crossed the ocean in company with her brother. The brother sits with us while she tells the story and agrees with every word she says, finally adding considerable more to her story. I don't take much stock in either of their stories, but all the same I put a shadow on the man whom they accuse of threatening them.

That night, the man and the woman are both murdered. The woman is killed by the prick of a hypodermic needle which contains a deadly poison. The man is butchered. The woman is discovered in a chair, looking as if she had dropped asleep there, but the man is taken to the bath room, is almost cut to pieces, and his face is bruised out of all recognition. There is blood everywhere in that bath room, while in the sleeping room where the other body is found there is not a sign of violence of any kind.

"We work up the cases together, each in our own way, and we eventually come to the same conclusions about them. We convince ourselves that the woman was killed by the man whose corpse we found in the bath tub, and that he in his turn was killed by the man I had kept under my shadow.

"In the meantime, the shadow never loses sight of his man. He sees him enter the house where the murders are committed. He sees him come out of that house and walk away as if nothing had happened. He follows him, and the man walks all the way to Yonkers.

"During that walk he frequently acts as if he were demented. In addition to that, we have the story, told to me by the man and the woman who are now dead, that this man who is shadowed is subject to fits of insanity.

"When he is captured, he certainly appears to be insane. I have him brought here. We find that he wears two suits of clothing, and that the under one of the two is stained with blood.

"He is so violent that we place him in a padded cell.

"Late at night, you and I, accompanied by the coroner, who is a doctor, visit the cell. We see this demented individual. It does not occur to one of us that he may be shamming——"

"And—pardon me for interrupting you, inspector—we have no reason yet to suppose that he was shamming."

"You don't suppose that his friends would take all that risk to get him out of here, do you, if he was as crazy as he appeared to be, when we saw him?"

"I don't know. I cannot tell now what their motive may have been; but the fact that they did take him away is not, to my mind, proof that he was sane."

"That's all right, Nick. I don't say that it does prove it, but what the devil would they want with him if he was not sane?"

"You can search me," replied Nick, laughing.

"And me, too. And on the other hand, if he was sane, why did he not use the opportunity he had when he came out of that house where the murders were committed, to get away?"

"You forget that he did not really have an opportunity."

"Well, he thought he had one."

"Perhaps he knew that he did not have one. Perhaps he knew that he was shadowed all the time. Perhaps——"

"Now you are arguing that he was sane all the time."

"I am not arguing either side of it. I am trying to look at each side, that is all."

"It all resolves itself back to the point that his friends would not have taken all that trouble to get him away from here if he had lost his reason."

"I don't think so, George. You might argue with just as much logic that he would not have permitted himself to be brought here at all if he had not lost his reason."

"Well, he's gone, anyhow, and he did not go alone."

"And you want him back, sane or insane, for the sake of the reputation of the force."

"You bet your life I do; and I want the three men who came here and got him, too."

"Why not the man who drove the hack, as well?"

"I've got him already."

"Oh, have you, indeed!"

"Yes. Fogarty knew him all right. It was all he did know, I reckon; but I found the driver. He's about as wise as Fogarty."

"So I should have supposed. What does he know?"

"Only that he was picked up around the corner by a policeman whom he did not know, and two men, who told him to drive here and wait for them. Then they came out with the bundle, and he drove them to a house in McDougall Street, where he left them on the steps.

That is the last he saw of them. He doesn't know whether they entered the house or not; but I know that they did not. The trail ends there, Nick."

"On the contrary, George, it seems to me that that is where the trail begins."

CHAPTER III.

THE SOCIETY OF ASSASSINATION.

When the detective took his departure from the office of the inspector, it was with the understanding that he would think over the matter of the strange escape of the insane prisoner, and that they would confer again about it that evening.

Both men had much to occupy their minds that day, and, in the meantime, Nick Carter was well aware that the official would set all the machinery of his department in motion, in the effort to obtain some trace of the fugitive.

His own ideas concerning the incident were rather vague.

The double tragedy in the house on Madison Avenue, as already described, had loomed into view so suddenly and so mysteriously, and had been so quickly disposed of, that already, although it was only a day old, so to speak, he had put it behind him as one of the ancient cases; but now, this escape of the prisoner brought it up again in spite of every argument he could, in his own mind, advance to the contrary.

The history of Antonio de la Vuelta, the escaped prisoner, as far as it was known to him, involved nothing more than the fact that he had been an avowed enemy of the man and the woman who had been killed in the house in Madison Avenue.

It went back no further, really, than the voyage across the ocean. The inspector had already, in the previous case, traced everything that could be traced of information concerning those two men while they were on their voyage over, and the result was—nothing.

It did not appear anywhere in their investigations that either of these men possessed friends on this side of the ocean, or that they had been accompanied by acquaintances when they crossed to this side.

It appeared, as far as actual knowledge went, that Vuelta was literally without a friend or an acquaintance in America, now that the Corazonas were dead. Who, then, could have been sufficiently interested in his fate to have taken all the chances that were taken to rescue him from the hands of the police?

Out of what mystery was it possible that his rescuers could have materialized? Why had he been rescued at all?

The more that Nick thought upon the subject the deeper he became involved in the mass of contradictions which seemed to accompany every phase of the complex question.

From police headquarters he visited his own downtown office, and was detained there until late in the afternoon; and there, also, other matters so entirely absorbed him and his attention, that the murder on Madison Avenue, which had led up to the escape of the prisoner from the headquarters' cell, was driven entirely from his mind.

The afternoon brought, also, one new case upon which, without much consideration of the subject, he detailed his assistant, Patsy, to do the preliminary work.

It was the case of an Italian banker who owned an establishment on Grand Street.

Nick gave the man only a few moments of his time, but as little straws will indicate the direction of the wind, and clews to mysterious cases will sometimes be discovered in the most unexpected places and at the most unexpected times, so it happened that this small affair, which barely attracted his interest, was destined to afford him the means of accomplishing one of his greatest achievements.

The man called himself Luigi Bonito. He said that he owned a small bank in Grand Street where he received deposits from his countrymen, who were laboring men, and that it had become noised about that he had amassed a fortune.

In consequence of this, he stated that he had received

a number of threatening letters in which demands for money were made.

To these letters he had paid no attention whatever, until the arrival of one which had come to him the preceding day.

This one was different from the others, in that it stated plainly that the writer was a member of an association which collected money from rich men; that his name had been entered on their books for the sum of ten thousand dollars, and that he was expected to pay that sum to them in monthly installments of two thousand dollars each, for five months.

He was instructed to have the cash in his pocket ready to hand over on demand, and that he was to give it, without an instant's hesitation, to the man who would say to him in Italian the words equivalent to "The collector for the poor demands payment."

The letter closed by warning him that if he defaulted in this payment, or if he failed to have it ready and to pay it over when the demand was made, that his youngest son would be killed, as if by an accident, in the streets of the city; that a week of respite would be granted to him after that, when the demand would be made again, and if he failed a second time, his next older son would meet a like fate, and so it went on with threats which included his entire family.

Cases of this sort were common in the detective's downtown office, and he rarely regarded them seriously. However, in this particular case, he called Patsy to him and turned the Italian banker over to him.

"Study the case out, Patsy," he said, "and if there is any real danger to this man—if you think there is more than a mere threat behind it, look it up. You can tell me about it later."

Nick read the letter which the banker had received before he turned it over to his assistant, and he was particularly attracted by the signature, which was nothing more nor less than a pair of crossed swords underneath which was written the letter B.

Instantly it flashed upon him where he had seen the exact counterpart of that mark.

When, in company with the coroner and the inspector, he had visited the padded cell of the crazy man the preceding night, he had noticed, tattooed on the breast of the maniac—or the supposed maniac, at least—the exact counterpart of the signature to the banker's letter.

When the man had approached him across the cell, his shirt was open at the front, and, for an instant only, before Vuelta with a quick motion covered it, Nick had seen that sign.

At that moment neither the sign, nor the act of covering it, had seemed worthy of notice, but now as he walked out of the office he recalled it all very vividly, and was on the point of starting back to question the Italian, when he changed his mind and left the matter, as he originally intended to do, to Patsy.

But there was another surprise awaiting him when he reached his home.

Ten-Ichi, his Japanese assistant, was awaiting him just inside the door, and, indeed, opened the door for the detective as he ascended the steps.

He held in his hand a sheet of paper and also a long, slender, murderous-looking knife.

"Hello, lad, what have you got there?" asked the detective, smiling and extending his hand for the paper, which had been folded together twice, and which had also been pierced through by some sharp pointed instrument.

"This letter," replied Ten-Ichi. "It came an hour ago."

"The postman didn't bring it, did he?" asked Nick.

"No, sir; I found it pinned to the front door."

"I see. And this knife was the pin, eh?"

"Yes."

"I don't suppose you saw it when it was placed there, did you, Ten-Ichi?"

"No. I wish I had seen the man when he did it."

Without further remark the detective spread the letter open before him, and at the first glance he started and smiled.

The signature to the letter was the same as the signature to the letter of the Italian banker, and, also, therefore, the same as the tattoo mark he had seen on the breast of Antonio de la Vuelta, in the prison cell.

"Ten-Ichi," he said, "while I am glancing over the

contents of this document. I wish you would step to the telephone, call up Patsy, and ask him to find out all he can about the signature to Bonito's letter, if he has not already done so."

As soon as he was alone, Nick read the letter. It was written in a plainly legible hand, and was in Italian. Translated, it read as follows:

"MR. NICK CARTER: This is written to inform you as follows:

"First. The writer of this letter, and his brothers, members of the society to which he belongs, are not letter writers. This is the first letter which has ever been sent out by them, or any of them, which was not a demand for money.

"Second. This letter is not a demand for money, for I, the writer, understand that you would not consent to be blackmailed, no matter what the threat might be against you; but,

"Third. This letter is intended to place you in exactly the same category with a man from whom money has been demanded, and to prove to you that you are rated high, and in order to impress upon you the full importance of this document, that you heed it and comply with its directions, I say that this letter is the same as if it were a demand for a million dollars. In other words, a full and complete compliance with the terms of this letter will be the same to us as if you had consented to pay into the treasury the sum of a million dollars.

"Fourth. You are forbidden to make any effort whatever to discover, and take to prison, the person of the man who was this morning taken away from police headquarters with the consent of the authorities.

"Fifth. If accident or chance should make you aware of this man's location, you are forbidden to reveal that knowledge to another for any purpose whatsoever.

"Sixth. If you disobey the commands conveyed in this letter, you will be dealt with precisely as if you had been commanded to pay a million dollars into the treasury and had refused to do so. Nothing can save you; nobody will spare you.

"Seventh, and last. This is no idle threat. If you should so regard it and elect to ignore it, you will deserve the fate which will be meted out to you."

That was all there was of the letter. The sign of the crossed swords was the only signature.

Ten-Ichi returned at the moment when Nick completed reading the letter, and the detective gave it to him in silence.

"What do you think of it, lad?" he asked, when the young Jap had finished reading it.

"It reads very much as if the writer of it meant what he said," replied Ten-Ichi.

"So it does," replied Nick, smiling. "Have you ever traveled in Southern Europe, Ten-Ichi?"

"No."

"Then I will tell you something about that sign of the crossed swords, and the letter B, which accompanies it."

"You understand then what it means?" asked Ten-Ichi.

"I am not sure that I do, but I think I do; and if I am right, we have got the toughest proposition ahead of us that has ever happened in my experience, for the Society of Swords is one of the oldest and most dreaded of all the societies of assassination in the world."

CHAPTER IV.

MAKING MILLIONAIRES TO ORDER.

"I wish you would tell me about it," said Ten-Ichi.

"There is very little to tell, that I can tell, for I know so little; and yet, I suppose I know as much about it as anybody who is outside the order."

"Is it, as you suggested, a society of assassination?"

"No; properly speaking it is not. A real society of assassination is one which is organized on the plans of the Mafia and the Carbonarri; they are genuinely societies of assassination. The order of the Crossed Swords, on the other hand, is a sworn brotherhood into which the descendants of certain Latin families are initiated, whether they desire it or not. They attain to the honor of membership by right of heredity, and if they refuse to take the oath and to believe as their fathers and grandfathers believed before them, they are assassinated.

"It is claimed that the order was organized by the Borgias—by Cesar Borgia, in fact—and that he com-

pelled all the great families of the time to join with him in the common cause, which was to preserve the pure blood of the nobility according to his ideas on the subject. If a daughter of a noble married beneath her—or to put it stronger still, if the daughter of a family who was a member of the order married out of the order, her husband was murdered. If she gave birth to a child by that husband, the child was killed.

"If a son went astray and married beneath him, or if he begat offspring in a case where the mother was not from a family which belonged to the order, the child and the mother were both put out of the way, and often the son was mysteriously murdered also, lest he, being a man, should seek to revenge himself.

"The order extended among all the great families of Italy and Spain. Occasionally a Frenchman was admitted—and once taken into the order meant that the man so taken became a member for life, and also that he swore to future membership all his descendants, agreeing, if necessary, to sacrifice his own children to the good of the order.

"There you have the origin of it.

"Such was the origin of the order; but it has degenerated, and now exists for an entirely different reason and purpose.

"Many of the great families among the original membership have died out or become extinct. With very few exceptions, all of them that remain have sunk to poverty and obscurity. There are to-day, laboring on our railroads, descendants of the oldest and the noblest families of Italy and Spain, but this is more true of Italy than of the other country.

"These people know very well who they are, although they hide their identity under assumed names. But they keep the blood of their descendants pure. They keep the blood of the noble families intact, and they plot and scheme all the while to restore the lost and vanished fortunes of their ancestors.

"They consider that they have been robbed of their rights, and the society of swords now stands for an association of men who pretend ignorance while they have profound learning; who labor in the fields and on the roads under assumed names, consorting with the commonest of their kind in order to obtain a livelihood, while in reality their sense of pride is so great that they will not speak at all with the aristocracy which we recognize to a greater or less extent.

"Every once in a while one of these laborers suddenly inherits a fortune. He retires to Italy, or Spain, purchases a castle and reassumes the position and the title of his ancestors.

"He is enabled to do this because his name is next on the list for the resumption of greatness.

"I will explain more clearly. This letter, for example, suggests what would have happened if I had been asked for a million dollars. Suppose I had been asked for a million, and suppose that I had paid it. That million would have been a part of a fund of several millions which the society was collecting for its next beneficiary. You, if you were a member of the order, might be that next beneficiary in succession. That million, put with four other millions, would be paid over to you, and you would retire to Italy, purchase the estates which your ancestors owned, six, seven or eight centuries or more ago, and another man would be selected for the next beneficiary.

"In the course of time a sum necessary to purchase his ancestral estates as yours had been purchased, and to establish him as a man of wealth, would have been collected, and he would retire in the same manner that you had done.

"And so it has gone on, one by one, man after man, year after year, and century after century—and it is this society that we are up against.

"Now, Ten-Ichi, they have the reputation of never making idle threats; they have the reputation of never making demands for money unless they are reasonably sure that they will get it, and that is the great reason why the society rarely comes into unpleasant prominence.

"It is their boast that they always fulfill their threats."

"Which means, in a few words, that if you persist in your determination to recapture that lunatic who escaped from headquarters, they will do something to you—but they don't say what it is they will do."

"They imply it plainly enough, for the letter means, in plain English, that if I disobey the commands they have given me, they will kill me—if they can."

"You believe in the sincerity of the threat, then?"

"Entirely so."

"How do you intend to act in the matter?"

"Exactly as if I had never heard of such a society and had never received such a letter, of course."

"You mean that you will defy them?"

"No; I mean that I shall ignore them."

"And what, do you think, will be the result?"

"Why, they will try to kill me, or they may try their hands first on you, or Chick, or Patsy, just as a matter of warning to me; they are not above doing such a thing."

"Well, I shall not run away."

"No, Ten-Ichi, I did not suppose you would. All the same, I am glad that I received this letter."

"Why so? If it had not been written, you would not have been in danger. If I understand you, they do not attack unless they first give warning of their intention."

"That is correct. They are like the rattlesnake in that—very much like it, and they are apt to strike almost as quickly after the warning, too."

"Then why are you glad that you received the letter?"

"Because it explains a mystery."

"What mystery?"

"The mystery of the rescue of Antonio de la Vuelta. I saw the sign of the Crossed Swords where it had been tattooed on his breast. He is a member of the order, therefore. It is possible that he is next in succession, or, at least, is near to the point of succession to a fortune which has been or is being collected for him; but whether that is true or not, he is a member of the order, so that whether he is sane or mad, they would not let him lie in prison if they could get him out. It explains the reason for that rescue."

"And does it also give you a clew how to find him?"

"No. But I think that chance put me in the way of obtaining that clew, when the Italian banker, Luigi Bonito, came into the downtown office. You see, Ten-Ichi, a demand for two thousand dollars is to be made on him in person. Certain words are to be uttered in his ears by a man, and when those words are uttered, he must pay."

"And you think by arranging a series of signals with the Italian, you can shadow the man who utters those words?"

"No; that would be impossible. The man who utters those words will take good care that no other person than the one for whose ears they are intended shall hear them, and also that the man who does hear them, has no opportunity to convey a signal in any form."

"Then how——"

"There is only one way to do it, Ten-Ichi."

"How is that?"

"It is for me to impersonate the banker. To take his place so thoroughly and for a sufficiently long time, that they will not suspect that I am not he. To have the money in my pocket, ready to pay, and to pay it over when it is demanded—in fact, to make two or three payments, if necessary, in order to win their confidence that Bonito means to continue them to the end of the demand."

"Do you think that they will relax their vigilance?"

"No; I know that they will not; but I will have an opportunity to improve mine. I can foresee where I will probably have to play the part of Luigi Bonito for several weeks, and it will be a difficult and not a very pleasant thing to do; but it is the only way."

"What will you do with Bonito himself?"

"Bring him here and shut him up in this house. He will have to remain here till the game is played out to the end. Chick will have to assume my place. He has done it many times, and that part of it will be easy.

"In taking my part, he will appear to be living up to the demands the society have made upon me, so that while I am actually at work against them, they will think that they have frightened me into complying with their commands."

"Good! I see the plan now."

"And you, Ten-Ichi, will have to take the part of my

chief assistant. You will have to be the one who takes the risks with me."

"You couldn't offer me anything that would please me more."

"I know that, my lad. You see, I do not believe that there are many members of this society in America. I wish I knew how many."

"There is only one way to find that out, chief."

"True; to become a member of the organization."

"And that is not an easy matter."

"Easy matter? It is the most difficult one I have ever undertaken, but, all the same, that is about what I will have to do before I finish with this case; I can see that plainly."

"And now, chief, will you tell me what I am to do first?"

"Very little, at present, my lad. Go and put on a disguise. You can do the Chinaman act splendidly, and I think I will establish you in a laundry that is next door to Benito's bank in Grand Street. Change yourself into Mr. Wun Lung as soon as you can, and meet me in an hour from now, at the corner of Grand and Mulberry Streets. We will look the ground over down there to-night, and unless I am greatly mistaken, there will be something doing, too."

CHAPTER V.

THE KNIFE-THROWER'S AIM.

When, just an hour later, Nick Carter approached the corner which is formed by the intersection of Grand and Mulberry Streets, it would have been impossible for any person of his acquaintance to have recognized him.

There was not a trace of the real Nick Carter in his appearance, and he had also taken good care, in case he might already be under espionage by the members of the Society of the Crossed Swords, that they should not trace his real identity into the disguise he now wore.

In a word, he had assumed the semi-picturesque costume of a recently arrived Italian. The arrangement of his dress was partly Italian and partly American. To look at it, suggested that he had been ashore only a short time, and that when he had landed, his friends had kindly taken him in hand and made sufficient suggestions regarding his costume so that it now represented neither one thing nor the other, but was a sort of happy combination of both.

He wore a courduroy cap set at a sharp angle over one eye. There were gold rings in his ears. His hair was so long that it almost touched his shoulders. It was as black as the wing of a raven, and it curled just enough to give it the right touch of romanticism.

He had darkened his skin to a rich olive hue, while a systematic penciling of his brows and lashes had rendered his eyes, or, at least, the appearance of them, almost black.

A short corduroy coat and vest, a low-cut shirt, with a flaring collar, adorned by a tie of brilliant red, and trousers that were skin tight at the knees and which flared wide where they covered the shoes, and a crimson sash tied about his waist, completed the general make-up.

He had tucked the ends of the sash partly out of sight, as if he had been told that such adornments were not worn in this country, and he had sought to compromise his taste with the existing customs in that manner.

And, if you had looked closely at that sash, you would have seen here and there, along the top of it, marks which to an educated eye plainly suggested that the man was in the habit of carrying weapons only half concealed in it; if you had watched him, you would have noticed that his hands frequently fell to his sides, where the sash encircled his waist, as if he were accustomed to permit them to rest affectionately and trustingly there, against the handle of a revolver, or the hilt of a knife; and you would have seen how quickly, when he discovered that such things were no longer there, he dropped his hands again, as if ashamed of the recollection.

In short, the character which the detective had assumed was a plain indication to every Italian he encountered that he had come to America directly from the mountainous parts of their native land, and that

he had not yet got the smell of the woods and the breath of the hillsides out of his nostrils.

He was an Italian mountaineer, pure and simple, and the little extra touches he had given to his make-up, and the motions he was so careful to make, were intended to convey exactly that impression to those whose sharp eyes would look for the signs which would be invisible to others.

And, reader, you must not suppose that Nick Carter had arrayed himself in this costume in his own house and sallied forth from it so. Not at all. He had merely prepared himself for the dress, applying here and there such touches as he might before he started out, and then he had gone to a distant part of the city, to a quarter where he knew that he would be unobserved, and there he had completed his make-up.

If the most expert shadow in the world had undertaken to have followed the detective from his own home that day, he would have been lost entirely in the maze of changes which took place in Nick's appearance before he finally appeared as we have just seen him.

Ten-Ichi was already at the corner when the detective arrived, and he had followed his instructions to the letter.

Being a Jap, it was an easy matter for him to assume the guise of a Chinaman, and he had done it so well that Nick smiled with pleasure when he saw his young assistant at hand, and ready to take up the work as ordered.

And Ten-Ichi certainly looked the part he was to play.

It is not necessary to describe his costume. You have but to look for a moment upon any Mongolian laundryman you chance to meet to see an exact reproduction of what Ten-Ichi was as he stood there on the corner awaiting the arrival of his chief.

The detective knew that Ten-Ichi would not recognize him at all, and so he approached at once, and halted, facing him, a broad grin of amusement on his face. He was resolved to put his assistant to a sharp test.

"You do-a de wash?" he asked, with a beaming smile. "You wash-a da clo, eh?"

The pseudo Chinaman stared at his questioner blankly, but he did not even attempt to reply; presently Nick tried again.

"Maybe you wait-a for man to come," he continued, still smiling, as only an Italian can smile. "You have-a da date; no? You come-a to the corn'; you wait-a for da man; he no come; he busy; no? Bime by you get-a tired of-a da wait, and you-a say da swear and-a go home."

The Chinaman's face was as blank as if the Italian had not spoken. He stared at his interlocutor as if he had not uttered a word, and Nick, after a moment of silence, said in his natural voice, but in a very low tone:

"How long have you been waiting, Ten-Ichi?"

But now it was Nick Carter's turn to be surprised, for the Chinaman still remained as impassive as he had been from the first. There was not even a suggestion of change in his expression, and he still appeared not to have heard what was said to him.

For a moment Nick stared in return. For just one instant he thought it possible that he had himself made a mistake and that the Chinaman in front of him might not be Ten-Ichi after all.

But it was only for a moment. His trained eyes were too keen to be deceived. There were little points here and there about the make-up of the assistant which, though invisible to another, were yet plain to his eyes, and he smiled again.

"You do the act mighty well, Ten-Ichi," he said, "and I am poud of you. Now, in a word, for we must not talk together here any more than is necessary, there are two laundries near Bonito's bank. One of them is on the same side of the street, close to it, and the other is directly opposite. For obvious reasons, the one opposite is better for our purposes, but either one of them will do. Do you think you can work your way into one of them?"

"I think so," replied Ten-Ichi.

"Try it. I would rather you would be accepted

peaceably, if possible, and you are a regular wizard when it comes to dealing with an Oriental."

"I once joined one of their secret societies," replied Ten-Ichi. "It was during the war between my country and China, when I served my august father in the capacity of a spy. No doubt, by means of that society, I cannot only make myself an inmate of one of the laundries, but I can also obtain the willing and almost eager assistance of those who live there now. I can play the Chinaman so well that not one of them will suspect that I am not what I appear to be. It only remains to be seen if there happens to be one or more members of the Sin Ka Yow in one of those laundries."

"Good! And if there is not?"

"Then you will have to think of another means—that is if you still think you want me in one of those places."

"Sure I do. Well, if the society dodge fails, we will either buy one of them out, or we will throw them out. Try the laundry across the street first. When I want you I will find you in or near one or the other of them."

"All right. It will probably be the one across the street since that is the one you prefer."

When Nick parted from Ten-Ichi, he went straight to the bank of Luigi Bonito, and entered.

The banker was at his counter, and he bowed and smirked with every blandishment he knew when he saw Nick enter the place, for he knew—or supposed he knew, which amounted to the same thing—that no Italian mountaineer, such as Nick appeared to be, would come to America without having the lining of his clothing well padded with money.

It so happened that the banker was alone in his place at the moment when Nick entered, and the detective immediately determined to appear to be the emissary of the Society of the Crossed Swords.

Casting a hurried glance around him in order to make sure that they were indeed alone, the detective stepped quickly forward, and, leaning over the counter so that his face almost touched Bonito's, he said, in a harsh whisper:

"The collector for the poor demands payment."

They were the words which Bonito had been told would be addressed to him by the man who was sent to obtain two thousand dollars of him. They were the words he most dreaded to hear, but which he well knew would some day be whispered in his ear, and which would bring with them a menace which was terrible.

Notwithstanding his determination to guard himself as best he could—notwithstanding his asserted bravery, demonstrated by his visit to the office of the detective, and in spite of the fact that he was in a measure prepared for the sound of those, to him, terrible words, he started back with a little exclamation of terror, and his face turned chalky white.

For a moment he made no reply, and Nick, perceiving the effect his words had made, drew back again to an upright position, and with a sphinxlike smile on his face, waited.

It was plain at once that Bonito had determined to take no chances against the men who had demanded his money. It was plain that, although he had taken up a sort of a gauntlet to fight them, by applying to the detective for his help, that he, nevertheless, intended, and had all along intended, to comply with their commands and to pay the money, if the demand were actually made.

After that first instant of hesitation, during which he had turned so pale, he quickly recovered himself; and then he replied, speaking as Nick had done, in pure Italian.

"I have the money ready at hand. It is in my pocket. Shall I hand it to you now, signor?"

"No," replied Nick. "Wait a moment. I am not the one to whom you were to pay it. I was sent here to test you; to make sure that you were ready, and also that you had not arranged with the officers to arrest the man who should demand it. Have you reported the matter to a representative of the law?"

"Indeed I have not," replied the trembling Bonito.

"Are you sure?" demanded Nick, sternly.

"Would I be prepared and ready to pay the money over to you now if I had done that?" demanded the crafty Bonito.

"Perhaps," replied Nick, smiling. "It might be a part of your plot."

"No! no! Indeed, no! There is no plot. The money is ready. Will you take it?"

"No," replied Nick again. "Another will take it. I have come here to try you; but I will come again. Is this demand the first that has been made upon you?"

"Yes."

"When the second demand comes, you will pay the money?"

"I shall be ready."

"See that you are."

Nick was in the act of turning away when the entrance was darkened for a moment by a new arrival, and turning, Nick saw a tall and well-dressed Italian walk in at the door.

Nick drew back from the counter, as if he had not finished his business with the proprietor, but was willing to give way, for the moment, to another who might be in more haste, and the stranger at once approached the counter where Nick had been standing.

There was no hesitation whatever in his act.

He leaned across the counter as Nick had done and he whispered something in the ear of Bonito, exactly as the detective had done; and Nick, watching closely, saw instantly that by a strange freak of good fortune he had entered the place at exactly the right time.

He knew, by the effect produced upon Bonito, that the stranger had whispered the same words in his ear that he had himself made use of a moment before.

Bonito, who seemed to feel that the streets were filled with representatives of the Crossed Swords, did not this time deem it necessary to respond to the demand in words.

He regarded himself as in the presence of two of those dreaded men.

Without a word he dipped his hand into one of his pockets and brought forth a roll of bills, and he had laid it on the counter and was in the act of counting it before the stranger realized what he was doing.

The opportunity seemed too good a one for the detective to neglect. It appeared as if the adventure, or, at least, a part of it, could be brought to a close right there by the immediate arrest of the blackmailer, and he was in the act of starting forward to arrest the man on the spot and thus catch him red-handed, when the door was again darkened, there was a loud, warning hiss from that direction, and the detective wheeled around just in time to discover that he had been made the target for a murderous-looking knife thrown by a second stranger, and which was even then in the air, midway between them, and was already speeding, point first, toward his heart.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PISTOL SHOT FROM THE STREET.

There was no time in which to dodge that knife, and it flew, true to its aim, straight at the heart of the detective.

If he had not, before he started out, prepared himself for just such an emergency, the long knife must have pierced his breast, and he must have fallen there on the floor of the little bank, mortally wounded, if not a corpse.

But Nick Carter knew well with whom and with what character of people he had to deal before he engaged himself in the work of running down the members of the assassination brotherhood, which dared everything to obtain its ends, and when he donned the costume in which he intended to work, he put on that wonderful shirt of woven mail which was presented to him, while he was still a lad, by a noble of Spain, in Madrid.

More than once in his career that shirt of mail had saved his life, and now it was destined to do it again.

The knife struck him full in the breast, and the man who threw it, darted forward with a cry of joy, believing of a surety that he would see the victim weltering in his blood on the floor of the bank.

But Nick Carter did not fall.

Instead, the knife, hurled as it was, with great force, snapped at the hilt, and blade and handle clattered to the floor together, leaving the detective standing there unharmed.

Yet, no; he did not stand there. He also started forward, at almost the same instant when his would-be slayer did so, and they came together halfway.

Instantly Nick Carter seized his opponent in his giant-like grasp, supposing that he would prove to be like any other average man of the streets, a mere child in the grasp of the detective.

He proved, however, to be almost as much of a giant in strength as Nick Carter himself, and when Nick seized him and would have thrown him into the air, and crushed him against the floor with stunning force, he found, to his surprise, that his opponent resisted to be treated so, for he stood squarely upon his feet, and at the same time put forth an amount of strength that was great as that which the detective had employed.

But if it was as great as Nick Carter had used, it was by no means as great as he could make use of.

The man who had thrown the knife was already smiling in satisfaction of his belief that he could easily handle the man who had seized him, when the detective put forth another effort.

This time he held nothing in reserve. His hands closed on the Italian who had attacked him, with a grip which almost crushed them. Then the foreigner, who believed himself to be a strong man, felt himself lifted like a child into the air, and he was whirled for an instant over the head of the detective and then hurled, as if he were a bag of grist, directly into the face of his friend who had demanded the money from Bonito, and who was now advancing to the attack.

All this had happened while a spectator might have counted four. The knife had been thrown and broken against the mail shirt of the detective; the knife thrower and Nick had met in the middle of the room; the banker behind the counter still leaned with one hand covering the money he was so loath to pay, and the man who had demanded it had started forward to assist in the attack upon the detective, when he was met halfway in his effort by the heavy weight of the body of his friend and companion as it was hurled against him by the mighty strength of Nick Carter.

The two men fell to the floor together, and Nick was in the act of starting toward them, to place the handcuffs on their wrists, when there came an assault which no man could have dodged, and which Nick Carter could not possibly foresee nor guard against, for the reason that his back was turned toward it.

The door had been left open by the man who had thrown the knife, and now, as Nick started toward the two men who had fallen to the floor, a piece of brick, half its original size, was hurled through the open door, and it struck the detective squarely on his head.

An ox would have gone down beneath that blow if he had been struck in the right place, and Nick Carter could not withstand it.

The missile struck him on the back of the head, and he pitched forward on his face on the floor without a word or a sound.

Instantly, when he fell, there was a second warning hiss from beyond the doorway, and the two men, already scrambling to their feet, for neither of them was hurt at all, heard it and obeyed the order it conveyed.

Without so much as a glance at the prostrate figure of the detective, they leaped for the doorway and darted through it into the street.

In a moment they were gone, lost to sight in the throng of pedestrians who always pass up and down along that section of the busy thoroughfare; and the entire scene had been enacted so quickly that the paralyzed Bonito was still standing, with his hand half covering the roll of bills on his counter, when the two men disappeared from view.

It was all a matter of amazement to him. He could not understand nor comprehend any part of it.

He had believed that Nick Carter, in his disguise as an Italian, so perfectly assumed, was a friend of the second man who had demanded his money, and he could not understand why an attack had been made upon him.

Then the knife throwing, the short struggle, and the hurling of one man against the other, so quickly followed by the flying brick which had struck down the first who had entered his place, had all followed one after the other so quickly, that he was dazed.

Even the passing crowd in the street had not been attracted by the disturbance, and the banker, after all the excitement of those few seconds, found himself again alone in his bank, save for the insensible man on the floor, and the fact that he still had his money intact before him.

But even as his eyes fell upon the man on the floor—the detective who had been struck down by the flying brick—Nick moved, sighed and then began slowly to raise himself from the floor.

The thick, corduroy cap, pulled down over the back of his head and at the same tipped jauntily to one side, had saved him.

There had been a certain amount of concussion from the blow of the brick against his head, but the bruising power of the missile was destroyed, and Nick had been merely stunned without being hurt at all.

He was on his feet again almost as soon as the two men had disappeared, and before the dazed Bonito had moved from behind the counter or had taken his hand from the spot where it covered the greenbacks.

One glance told him that his assailants had made good their escape, and he knew that he now had all his work to do over again with much less chance than before of success, since the Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords must now be assured that there was somebody on their track, and they would no doubt make a very shrewd guess concerning the identity of that person.

But he did not in any way reveal his identity to the banker. Instead of that, he decided on the spot that it would be wise to continue the part he had played. Accordingly, when he spoke he made use of the same pure Italian he had used in the first place.

"Do you often receive callers who are so active?" he asked of Bonito, approaching the counter and placing one hand meaningly at his side as if to touch a weapon there.

The banker was too dazed to reply, and Nick continued:

"Was this all a part of the plot you had laid to capture me and my friends?"

"On my soul, signor, I know nothing about those men; no more than I do about you," protested Bonito.

"And yet they attacked me within a moment of the time when I came here and uttered the secret words to you, as a sign to pay me the money; and you must believe that I am the right man, since I told you that I would not take the money, but that another would call for it."

"But, signor, the other did call for it."

"What do you mean?"

"The man who entered here must be one of you. He also spoke the secret words to me—the words which are a demand for the money."

"And you would have paid it to him without protest?"

"*Si, signor,* just as I would have paid it to you without protest."

"And did he say to you, 'The collector for the poor demands payment?'"

"He uttered those very words. You saw that I produced the money without hesitation."

"Yes."

"I thought at the time that it was arranged between you. That he was to follow you into this place as he did, and that he was to receive the money in your presence—and now, oh, it is terrible!"

"What is terrible?"

"They did not receive the money as they demanded and they will kill my child."

"Hush, my friend! Not so fast. I don't think they will do that."

"They will do it. The Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords never fail when they threaten."

"No? But they will fail this time, Signor Bonito."

"They never fail."

"They will fail now, for I will make them fail. Am I not one of the brotherhood myself? Wait; I will show you."

The detective turned his back for a moment. Then he opened his shirt and unfastened the hooks which held the shirt of mail in place beneath it, thus baring a small spot on his breast.

Then he turned again so that he faced the banker.

"See," he said; and Luigi Bonito gasped in astonishment, for there before his eyes, on the detective's breast, showed the sign of the crossed swords with the letter B plainly visible, as if the insignia had been tatooed there.

Bonito bowed low in humility, for instantly he believed that he was in the presence of a descendant of one of the great families of Italy.

"Your highness will pardon me," he said, humbly. "I did not know; but now I know."

"I am a Borgia and a Spada," said Nick, with an assumption of pride in his tone and his manner. "I am the descendant of both of those great families, and the only one who is living now to represent either of them."

"You are a great man," said the humble banker, now assured that his companion told him the truth. "Shall I pay this money to you?"

"No; keep it."

"And when I receive another command to pay it, shall I obey? Or——"

"If you are alone here—that is if I am not present when the demand is made, pay it as you would have done now; but if I am present, do as you did this time."

"How is that, signor?"

"Take the money from your pocket as if to pay it over, but keep your hand upon it until I give you permission to pay."

"But you will be here only a few moments. You will soon go away and after you are gone I will not know what to do."

"No; I shall not be far away from you until—until either the money is all paid in, or you are out of danger. Now, wait for me. I will return in a moment."

Without another word, Nick left the bank and started across the street.

His hope was that Ten-Ichi had not lost sight of him while he was in the bank and that he had seen enough of what had occurred there to have gone after the fleeing Italians.

He crossed the street directly to the laundry, and was rather amazed and somewhat disappointed to discover Ten-Ichi seated outside the door, smoking a cigarette exactly as if he lived there and owned the place. He thought for an instant that Ten-Ichi had seen nothing of the disturbance.

But as Nick approached the laundry, Ten-Ichi rose from his seat and entered the laundry.

Nick followed him inside, and continued to follow when Ten-Ichi led the way into the back part of the establishment, where they could not be seen or overheard from the street.

"Chief," said Ten-Ichi, hastily, before Nick could ask a question, "I found that this shop was filled with members of my Chinese society. They are smart and keen, too. I saw the three Italians who ran away from the bank, and I have put a Chinaman on the track of each one. By the time an hour has passed, I will know where to find each of them, and if we know where they are, we should have no difficulty in finding the others."

"You have done well, Ten-Ichi—that is, if the Chinamen serve you faithfully."

He was about to add more when they were both startled by the sound of a pistol shot from the street, immediately followed by the cry of murder.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BROTHERHOOD'S QUICK VENGEANCE.

Ten-Ichi leaped toward the door, and would have rushed immediately into the street, but the detective put out a restraining hand and detained him.

"Wait, lad," he said. "I must use your eyes now. It will not be wise for me to appear coming from this shop at the crack of a pistol. Go, now. See everything and return here as soon as possible and tell me what has happened."

Ten-Ichi darted out of the door then, and Nick, after assuring himself that there were no strangers in the laundry, went again into the front shop, from which he could see across the street.

He saw at once, as he had suspected he would see, that a crowd had collected in front of Bonito's bank. He saw several policemen already there, and others

arriving, and he saw that two of them were keeping the crowd back from the door of the little bank, into which they all seemed to make an effort to peer.

"I should not have left him quite so soon," mused the detective. "And yet, it would have made no difference. They would have got him anyway, as soon as I did leave him. By Jove! But their vengeance is swift and sure."

There seemed to be considerable excitement inside the banker's place, and from his place near the laundry window Nick could see policemen moving back and forth inside the place.

Then, presently, after several moments had passed, Ten Ichi returned.

"Well, Ichi?" said the detective.

"Luigi Bonito has been shot," replied Ten-Ichi.

"I suspected it the moment I heard the pistol shot," replied Nick. "Is he dead?"

"No; but badly wounded."

"Is there a doctor there?"

"Yes; just came. Bonito will not die, it is reported in the crowd on the street. They say that he was shot by another Italian."

"Yes."

"And the description they give tallies exactly with the costume you are wearing."

"I suspected that also."

"You will have to make some changes."

"No; I think not. Is Bonito conscious?"

"They say he is. I could not get very close in this Chinaman rig-out."

"Naturally not. If Bonito is conscious, I think I will go over there at once."

Nick did not wait for further words, but hurried out of the door and across the street.

The instant he appeared in view of the crowd, which had now become dense near the door of the little bank, there was a loud clamor.

Some person among those who were gathered there had seen him when he left the bank shortly before Bonito was shot, and remembered him. Indeed it afterward appeared that this person was the one who had given his description to the police as being the assassin.

"The murderer! the murderer! Lynch him! lynch him!" was the cry; and it was followed by others that were equally threatening; but Nick Carter strode calmly on his way unheeding.

His calmness awed them in a measure, and as he approached and it became evident that his purpose was to enter the place where his supposed victim was awaiting him, the crowd parted for him to pass through, as if with common consent.

As he drew near the door he encountered a policeman who, without a word, reached out one brawny arm and seized upon him.

"They want you inside, Dago," he said, gruffly; and he started, with what would have been unnecessarily brutal force, had his prisoner been any other man than Nick Carter, to drag him toward the open door.

But Nick did not drag worth a cent.

With a quick action he shook his arm free from the grasp of the policeman and stepped back.

"You-a no touch-a de Dago," he said, calmly. "You-a not-a fit to touch-a da man you call-a da Dago. Don't-a rais-a da club at me, or I tak-a da club away from you. I am a Spada and a Borgia."

The policeman, now white with anger at being thus defied, made a second grab at the detective, but instead of seizing him he found himself seized and turned quickly around. Then, before he had time to call out or to protest, his feet were kicked from under him, and he was laid, sprawling upon his back on the pavement, while Nick Carter, releasing his hold upon him, went calmly on his way into the doorway.

Inside the door he encountered a second officer, and he was aware that several others, who had seen the short struggle between him and the officious copper on the street, were hastening forward, but before they could reach him he had passed through the door and was inside the banking office of Luigi Bonito.

Bonito was stretched upon the counter almost where he had put his money after he carefully covered it with his hand; and as Nick entered the room, his eyes were on the door and he saw and recognized him instantly.

Nick, perceiving that Bonito had seen him, and that

he was entirely conscious, disdaining to notice all others in the room, addressed Bonito.

"I was in the laundry on the opposite side of the street," he said, in Italian. "I heard the pistol shot, and I hastened here. Now they tell me that I am accused of shooting you. I have returned for you to tell them in my presence that it is not true."

Two policemen had crowded through the door after Nick, and they now approached and laid their hands heavily upon his shoulders.

Then, inasmuch as the detective did not resist them, they hustled him forward until he stood directly in front of Bonito.

"Is this the man who shot you?" one of them demanded.

"No. He is not the man who shot me," replied Bonito, in perfect English.

"Did you see the man who did shoot you?" persisted the officer.

"Certainly I saw him."

"And could you identify him if you saw him again?"

"Certainly I could identify him."

"Then you are sure that this is not the man?"

"I am positive that this is not the man. I know it is not the man. This man was here, but he went away fifteen minutes before I was shot. Then a stranger stepped to the door and fired the bullet at me. This man is a friend of mine."

"Who is he? What is his name?" asked the policeman, and Nick wondered what Bonito's reply would be, for he had given no name whatever to the banker.

But Bonito, with that calm assurance which surprises us so much, especially in Italians, who are supposed never to lose their impetuosity, replied placidly:

"He is Borgia Spada. I know him well. He has not been long in this country. He is my friend. He would not hurt me. And, gentlemen, I am not badly hurt, the doctor says. I do not know the man who shot me. He was a stranger to me. That is all I know about it."

The doctor stepped forward at this juncture.

"The man is not much hurt," he said. "The ball has broken no bones and it has passed through the flesh and out again. I have dressed the wound as well as it can be done at the present moment. He has now only to place himself under the care of his regular physician."

So the great excitement of the moment dwindled away to nothing. The crowd before the door dispersed, and the policemen took their departure.

Then it was that Nick volunteered to take his new friend to his home.

"I will send for a carriage," he said, "and I will take you home. Then, when you are safe, I have something to propose to you. You are not seriously hurt."

"No. I can return to-morrow and attend to my business almost as usual."

"Very good. We will announce that fact when we go."

Half an hour later the carriage was at the door, and Nick, who now posed as the friend of the banker, locked up the place and assisted him to the carriage at the curbstone.

Before they drove away, Nick affixed a placard to the front of the door, upon which he wrote in Italian:

"This place will be open for business, as usual, to-morrow. It is temporarily closed because of a slight injury to the proprietor." And he signed it with the name of the banker.

Then they drove away together in the hack, but not before the sharp eyes of the detective had discovered that every move they made had been closely watched by two Italians, one being on either side of the street, and that when the hack started away, they pursued it.

But he also noticed another interesting fact, which was that there was also a Chinaman in view, who seemed to him to be following the two Italians; and he smiled, well pleased.

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER'S DOUBLE DISGUISE.

It often happened in the experience of the detective that he wished to be in two places at the same time. That experience comes into the lives of most persons, I believe, and it certainly occurred to the detective with

full force when on the morning following the shooting of the Italian banker, he opened his eyes after a good night's rest and decided that it was time to be up and doing.

He had met Ten-Ichi again after taking the banker home the preceding night, and as the conversation which passed between them will serve to enlighten us regarding the future movements of the detective, it will be well to go back for a moment over that ground.

As soon as Nick had made Luigi Bonito comfortable, and had sent for the family physician, he made himself known to the banker.

"I am Nick Carter," he said, "and my purpose in calling upon you at your office to-day was to save you, if possible, from the machinations of the Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords. Now, the fact that you were shot, while not a pleasant experience for you to undergo, is all the same, since you are not even seriously hurt, the very best thing that could have happened to you."

Then, when the banker had recovered from his surprise, Nick disclosed the plan he had had in mind from the first.

This was, as the reader is already aware, to disguise himself as Bonito and to appear in the office of the little bank as its proprietor.

To the average mind, this would seem an impossible task, but to Nick Carter it was really a simple matter.

He possessed the gift and the talent to so perfectly imitate the appearance, the voice and the manner of other men, that he had frequently deceived intimate acquaintances in that way, and while now he felt that this imitation was unnecessary, in the light of the fact that the Chinamen whom Ten-Ichi had put upon the track of the three members of the brotherhood would probably in the end be able to lead him to them, still it was possible that they might fail, or that the three Italians they were following might in the end prove to be nothing more than mere hirelings.

In either of the above cases, Nick Carter would be again at a loss in his pursuit of the real purposes of the conspirator, rather, in pursuit of the double purpose of the case, which was, of course, to find and to return to custody the escaped prisoner, Antonio de la Vuelta, and at the same time to discover the secrets of the Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords, and to chase the institution out of the United States before it should have an opportunity to become so firmly rooted here that it would be impossible of eradication.

Since the recovery of the lost prisoner and the discovery of the secrets of this great and mysterious order involved about the same course of procedure, Nick's purpose might well be called a double one.

He had not thought when he entered the office of the bank that day that there was any possibility of his coming into such immediate contact with any of the members of the order, and his only desire therefore was to satisfy himself whether he could or could not trust the banker with his secrets; but the entrance of the real emissary of the brotherhood, while the detective was still there, had altered his immediate plans, as we have seen.

Then fate chose to change them still more, for fate permitted the two men who entered the bank, as well as the one who waited outside, to escape.

If the detective could have captured one of them, or could have followed one or all of them in person, to their hiding place, he would have had little difficulty in getting on the track of the real secrets of the order by impersonating one of them, and thus introducing himself into their councils.

By such a means, all necessity for impersonating the banker at his place of business would have been at an end.

But the men had escaped, and Nick Carter had very little faith that the Chinamen would be able to track them. Ten-Ichi, on the other hand, had perfect faith.

Still, Nick Carter was a thorough believer in the efficacy of the maxim that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and now that fate had ordained that the banker should be, for the time at least, incapacitated from attendance upon his business, Nick saw in that fact a reason which amounted almost to a duty why he should stick to his first intention.

It was therefore for this reason that he arranged it

with the banker, who readily agreed to trust Nick with his keys and with everything in his place of business, for it must be understood that the greater part of that business consisted in receiving small deposits of cash, which the laborers paid into his hands for safe keeping.

Then there was the clerk also who would be on hand to assist the detective, who could easily lie back and leave the major part of the work for him to do on the ground that his recent injury was still painful.

This clerk had been absent the preceding day, sent away on business by his employer; but he would be on hand in the morning for his work.

The sole objection raised by the banker to the arrangement consisted in his unwillingness that Nick should assume the risks and dangers to which, as Luigi Bonito, he would be subjected, but Nick soon talked him out of that, and the arrangement was consummated.

Then came his talk with Ten-Ichi.

When he left the banker, it was with the understanding that he would return there during the night and that he would be prepared to leave the house on the following morning, in the character of the banker; and he went away solely to consult with Ten-Ichi. Of course it is understood that he was still in the character to which Luigi Bonito had so readily given a name—that of Borgia Spada.

He found Ten-Ichi awaiting him at the laundry, and he was greeted by the words:

"Well, chief, those Chinamen are all right. They tracked all three of the men."

"Good!" replied Nick. "Excellent! Then our work is cut out for us, isn't it? We have only to descend upon them and arrest them; eh?"

"Not quite so fast as that," replied Ten-Ichi. "The three men went through an alleyway to the rear of some houses in Mulberry Street. Only one of the Chinamen dared to follow them into that place, and he found that there were five others there with whom the three talked for a long time. Then the whole five separated, and each went in a different direction."

"And as your Chinaman could not follow all of them, they followed none of them; is that the idea?"

"Partly; although there is more to it."

"What more?"

"One of the Chinamen has lived in this section of the city so long that he has learned to speak and to understand Italian fairly well. He heard them making their arrangements for to-morrow when they parted, and he consequently discovered when they are to meet there, at the same place again."

"That is not so bad. When is it to be?"

"At midnight to-night."

"Good! We will be there also, Ten-Ichi."

"While they were talking another Italian joined them. He had read the placard you put on the door of the bank and he told them that it would be open for business as usual to-morrow, and that Bonito would be in attendance, so they decided to make another demand upon him for the money, during the day to-morrow, and to meet, as I have said, at midnight, for consultation."

"Well, that is all right as far as it goes. I shall be in Bonito's place when they make the demand to-morrow, and I will know how to answer them."

"How, if I may ask?"

"Why, I shall give them the money on the spot. You will be outside—here or anywhere—where you can shed your Chinaman's costume as quickly as possible, so that you can follow the right man. If you will stand so that you can see in at the door, I will give a cigar to the man I wish you to shadow, and I will strike a match and offer him a light with it so that you will make no mistake in the man."

"I will be ready."

"Now, there is one more thing, Ten-Ichi."

"What is that?"

"When I drove away from the bank in the hack with Bonito, I noticed that we were followed by two Dagos. One of them was doubtless the chap who read the placard on the door and then afterward went to the meeting in Mulberry Street to report the fact."

"Yes; he was."

"I noticed that one of your Chinamen was on the track of those fellows. Tell us what they did, for I

paid no attention whatever to them, knowing that you had them under your eyes."

"They merely followed to the house, saw you enter it with Bonito, and then they came away. One of them returned to Mulberry Street, as you suspected, and the others went in other directions. My man happened to follow the one who returned to Mulberry Street."

"Well, that is all. Things look rather bright for the morrow now."

"But you cannot be Bonito and Borgia Spada at the same time, chief."

"No; I wish I could. I will be as near to it as possible, though."

"How so?"

"All Italians—or, at least, almost all of them—look enough alike so that there will not be any very great change necessary, in order to transpose myself from Bonito into Spada very quickly. I will have a clerk in the bank with whom I can leave the administration of affairs. Your work will consist in keeping your eyes on that door from the time it opens in the morning until the man whom I shall designate leaves it with the two thousand dollars in his possession. That man I expect you to follow until I relieve you of the necessity, no matter if you have to alter your disguise a dozen times, and if he takes you around the world. You understand that, don't you?"

"Perfectly."

"Then I will say good-night. I am going back to the home of Bonito. When next I appear on the street it will be an impersonation of him, and so, when Bonito appears to enter his bank in the morning, it will not be Luigi Bonito at all, but Nick Carter. Good-night."

"Good-night, chief."

And this shows why the detective, when he did enter the little Italian bank in the morning, wished that he could be in two places at one time. He wished that he could be where he was, in the disguise of the Italian banker, and also that he could be on the outside, still wearing the costume of Borgia Spada, the mountaineer.

He knew that this was destined to be a day of events, and he was prepared for them, but he wished that it were possible for him to do his own work and Ten-Ichi's also.

CHAPTER IX.

READY FOR THE LAST PLAY.

The interior of the little bank over which Luigi Bonito presided was not unlike any ordinary ground floor store on Grand Street, with the exception that it occupied only half of the width of the building, and that it had been partitioned off so that it extended only half the depth of the place.

The back half, beyond the partition, was used as a sort of storeroom by the banker, for he did also something in the nature of a pawnbroker's business, inasmuch as in lending money to his customers he frequently had to take personal property as security.

Along one side of this front room ran a counter, and the front half of the counter was protected by a wire screen, such as are frequently seen in places of the kind.

Behind the screen was a high desk, where the accounts were figured up, and on the floor, also behind the screen, stood a safe.

The clerk had already arrived when Nick got to the store, for he was careful to be there exactly at the time when it was the custom of Bonito to arrive.

Nick had questioned Bonito very closely regarding his habits, and there was not a detail of his possible actions regarding which he had not thoroughly posted himself, so that he knew precisely how he should greet the clerk, what to say to him and what not to say to him.

Among other things the detective had used up an hour or more in practicing an imitation of Bonito's voice, so that he had it perfectly—so perfectly in fact that the clerk did not even raise his head from his work in response to the good-morning he received, other than to return the greeting.

He was not a voluble clerk. He had been taught the value of silence by his employer, and all the world knows that there are no stricter employers than the

Italians, who permit no familiarities of any kind on the part of their hirelings.

Nick passed around back of the counter and into the space behind the screen. Then he opened the safe and placed the money and other things in their regular places, as he had been directed to do by the banker.

When everything was in readiness for the business of the day, he addressed the clerk in Italian.

"I was shot at last night," he said.

"Yes, sir," replied the clerk.

"And wounded."

"Yes, sir."

"Only slightly."

"Yes, sir."

"You will attend to all the business to-day, as far as possible. You will disturb me only when there is something to which you cannot attend yourself."

"Yes, sir."

"You can do everything, can't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know how to say anything besides yes, sir?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, say it."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, why don't you say it?"

"What do you wish me to say, sir?"

"That's it. You have said it. Now, do you understand my instructions?"

"Yes, sir."

"I will sit back there in my chair. You will not call me unless it is absolutely necessary, no matter who wishes to see me."

"Yes, sir."

"You are favored with a very limited vocabulary, young man, and I suppose it is a good thing that you are," was Nick's mental comment as he went to his chair, which was behind the screen, and therefore out of reach of customers unless he chose to rise to receive them.

The morning passed without anything out of the usual routine of business happening.

Customers entered and made deposits of small sums, or drew small sums from deposits already made, and departed; and this continued until the detective ceased to raise his eyes from the paper he was reading, when a person entered the place.

But once during all that time was it necessary for the clerk to speak to him, and therefore he did not speak at all.

When noontime came and the clerk began to glance at the clock, showing by the act that it was approaching his customary time for going to his luncheon, Nick broke the silence which had endured between them by saying:

"You will not go out for your luncheon to-day. You will call a passing boy to the door and send him for what you require, and I will pay for it. I do not wish to be alone at all to-day."

"Yes, sir," replied the clerk, and the boy was called and dispatched.

Shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon, two men entered together. One of them paused near the door and the other approached the counter where the clerk was standing.

"I wish to speak to Luigi Bonito," he said, in Italian, to the clerk.

"Mr. Bonito is not well to-day. He cannot be disturbed unless the matter is something to which I cannot attend," was the reply.

"Well, this matter is something to which you cannot attend. Call him, if you please."

"When you have told me what the business is, and I am sure that I cannot attend to it, I will call him," was the calm reply.

"I repeat that you cannot attend to it. That it is something which concerns him personally," insisted the man.

"I am attending to all his personal business to-day, sir."

"Nevertheless I demand that you call him."

Nick was peering over the top edge of the paper at the man, who turned at that moment and saw him behind the wire screen.

"Ah!" said the man. "There he is. I will call him myself."

And at the same instant Nick Carter remarked to himself:

"That is the chap who stood at the counter yesterday, when Bonito would have paid him the money. That is the same man whom I knocked down by hurling his companion at him, when the third one hit me with the brick. He has changed his disguise, but he has done it badly, and I know him perfectly."

The stranger came up close to the screen now, and called through it.

"Bonito!" he said. "Luigi Bonito!"

"I do not know you, sir," replied Nick, without moving. "My clerk will attend to you."

"But your clerk cannot attend to me. The proprietor himself must do that."

"Then go to another bank," said Nick. "There are others near here. I am not well. My clerk has full charge of the business to-day."

"But I must speak with you in person, sir. Your clerk cannot transact this business for you; neither can another bank do it. It must receive your own attention."

"Ask my clerk about it," said Nick, imperturbably, without moving.

The man outside the screen frowned and bit his lip in vexation. Then, moving still closer to the screen and pressing his lips against it, he whispered hoarsely:

"The collector for the poor demands payment."

"Ah!" exclaimed Nick, as if he were suddenly reminded of something that he had forgotten, and was correspondingly frightened. "I know who you are now, sir. I can move about only with great pain. Will you come around behind the screen and talk to me here?"

"Yes," was the reply, and Nick at once directed the clerk to show him the way.

There was another chair near the little desk at which Nick was seated, and the detective knew, when the stranger was seated there, that the watching Ten-Ichi could see them both, if he were looking that way, and there was no doubt that he was.

The man came around without hesitation. Evidently he was not one who was troubled by personal fears. His companion, he who entered with him, remained near the street door.

"Be seated," said Nick, and at the same time he drew a roll of bills from his pocket and held it in his hand so that the stranger could see it. "I have the money ready for you; but first, since we are alone, will you reply to one question I would like to ask?"

"That depends upon what the question is," was the surly response.

"It is this: Who shot me yesterday?"

"One of my friends."

"One of your friends! Were you here yesterday?"

"It was I who used the words to you."

"Indeed. Why was I shot? I was in the act of giving you the money. Must I give you the money and be murdered also? If so I will not give the money."

"No; we thought you had betrayed us. There was a man here. We thought he was an officer, and that you intended to betray us to him."

"You were mistaken. That man was my friend; a cousin. He is very strong. He thought as you did, it seems. He thought that you intended to rob me, and so he fought. Now, sir, if I pay you this money and continue to pay it as you demand it, until the full sum you have demanded is paid, will I still be in danger of my life?"

"Certainly not."

"Nor my friend who fought for me yesterday?"

"We have no interest in your friend. He is safe as far as we are concerned."

"Very good. Then here is the money. Two thousand dollars. Now, when shall you call for the next installment?"

"One month from to-day. You will not be disturbed before then."

"Then that is all."

"Yes."

The stranger rose to go, but as he did so, Nick took a cigar from his pocket and placed it between his teeth; then, slowly, he took another one and extended it toward the stranger.

"Will you smoke?" he said. "It will be better if I treat you as a friend."

"Thank you," replied the stranger, accepting the cigar.

Nick struck a parlor match so that it flashed up brilliantly, and extended it toward the man.

"Here is a light," he said.

"Thank you," repeated the stranger. "I appreciate your courtesy. We will deal fairly with you;" and he turned away and presently left the bank, accompanied by the man who entered it with him.

"Good!" said Nick. "It was easier than I thought. Now for the last play in the game."

CHAPTER X.

THE LAST PLAY OF THE GAME.

At ten o'clock that same night four persons were seated upon an overturned dry-goods box in front of the entrance to an alleyway on Mulberry Street, not far from police headquarters itself—that is to say, a block or two farther down the street, in the regular Italian quarter of the city.

Any person who happened to pass that way would have naturally supposed these four to be Italians, for they certainly looked the parts.

In fact, however, not one of them was an Italian, for the four were Nick Carter and his assistants, Chick, Patsy and Ten-Ichi; and as may be readily supposed they were there for business.

Nick Carter still wore his disguise as Borgia Spada. Chick was disguised simply as an Italian laborer, as were also the other two, and as the reader can guess, they were watching the entrance to the meeting place of the men who were instrumental in taking the two thousand dollars from the Italian bank.

Ten-Ichi had followed the two men who procured the money from Nick. He had seen the signal of the lighted match, and he had dogged their steps to this very place.

He had been there ever since, for the two had not come out again, and he and Nick knew by inference that they were waiting there for midnight to come, when their friends would appear, as had been agreed between them.

Nick Carter had not communicated with the inspector at all since he had taken the trail of the men who belonged to the Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords, and he now felt glad that he had not done so, for although he knew that he was on the track of the right parties to take him to the rescued prisoner, whom the inspector was chiefly interested in rearresting, he was by no means sure that this night would accomplish that particular capture.

But he felt all the same that this brotherhood matter was really of more immediate importance than the maniac prisoner.

He had followed as the case had led him, and he knew now that a few hours would bring about interesting developments.

It was a quarter to twelve before the men whom he suspected of being a part of the meeting began to arrive, and then they came almost together—nine of them.

"They are nine and we are four. Can we handle them?" he asked of Chick, who was next to him on the dry-goods box.

Chick only smiled, by way of reply. He did not regard an answer as necessary, and he knew that his chief did not expect one.

Presently the detective glanced at his watch. Then

he closed it with a snap and rose from his position on the box.

"Come," he said. "It is time for us to interfere."

Silently they followed him through the alleyway to the rear of the houses, where there were still other houses built in the center of the block.

These were small, two-story affairs, and Ten-Ichi pointed at one of them which appeared dark and deserted.

"That is the house to which they led the Chinaman," he said.

"Good!" replied Nick. "It will not take us long to get inside of it."

He tried the door softly, but it was fastened. Then he tried his pick lock, that wonderful little instrument which he always carried in his pocket, and the door yielded at once. No ordinary lock could long withstand that delicate tool.

Inside, the hall was in total darkness, but beyond if they could see where a dim streak of light sifted underneath a door, and toward this they crept silently.

The detective got down on his knees and placed his ear against that crack under the door through which the beam of light was visible, and he could hear the murmur of voices, although he could not distinguish a word that was said.

"We must go inside," he whispered to Chick, who was next to him. "Pass the word for the others to stand ready. These fellows will fight, and they will fight to kill. Don't forget that."

He waited a moment, and then he whispered again:

"I will open the door softly. I will unfasten it, and push it ajar as far as it will go without making a noise. When it begins to make a noise, or the moment when any one of the men in the room is attracted by it, I will shove it wide open instantly, and then we must all leap inside the room together.

"Wait! I will go ahead. I will shoot down that leader, but without hurting him much. With him out of the way I think the others will be easy marks. That fellow is afraid of nothing, and I shouldn't wonder if he is the man who played the part of Sultzheimer so successfully.. He is smart all right. I could see that to-day. Now are you all ready?"

They were.

Nick tried the door and found that it was not fastened.

He discovered, moreover, that there was not even a latch upon it, and that as he pushed against it, it made no sound.

There was not a squeak in it, fortunately, and it fell wider and wider open, inch by inch, until all four of the detectives could plainly see into the room.

And there, seated with their backs toward the now open door, and so that they faced a stove in which a fire was burning, were nine men—the nine whom they had counted.

On the mantle over the stove was a single kerosene lamp, which emitted only a feeble light, but it was sufficient to show that every man who was seated there had his eyes fixed upon a picture which hung against the wall above it.

And that picture? It was the same as the signature to the letters they had seen. It was the same as the mark which the detective had seen upon the breast of the insane prisoner at headquarters.

Nick wondered if they were worshiping it, or saying their prayers to it; and then, as not one of the party moved or spoke, and just as he was about to throw himself forward as he had intended to do, from the room beyond the one they had entered there arose a series of shrieks and yells so wild and terrible that every man of them, including the Italians, involuntarily placed his hands to his ears.

"It is Vuelta," thought Nick; and then in a loud tone he called out in Italian:

"Surrender, all of you, or die!"

At the instant he called out, all the detectives touched the springs of their searchlights, and as the Italians bounded to their feet and turned to face the enemy who had so suddenly burst upon them, they

were met by blinding rays of light full in their eyes, and at the same time by the reports of pistols, as if the room were suddenly filled with giant fire crackers.

And then Nick and Chick, followed by Ten-Ichi and Patsy, bounded among them.

They struck right and left with the billies they had in readiness, and wherever they struck a man fell senseless to the floor.

Nick Carter himself went through them like a whirlwind, and the men who stood in his path went down like grass before a scythe.

And all this time the yelling from the room beyond them continued.

All this time? No, only just that little time, for in a few seconds from the instant of the first alarm, the nine Italians were on the floor, many of them senseless, and the others with shackles on their wrists and ankles.

It was a complete surprise and therefore a complete rout.

Not one of the detectives was injured, save for a bruise which Chick received on his head at the very first instant of the onslaught, and he was certain that Patsy, and not one of the Italians, did that.

Nor were any of the prisoners badly hurt. One of them, the chief of the outfit, had a bullet through his knee. Nick had considered that a necessary proceeding, and he had taken good care to put the bullet there at the very first.

Almost before the Italians realized that they were attacked they were prisoners, and when they knew that they had been captured—when they realized that there was no means of escape—then, as if by common consent, or by previous arrangement, they shut their lips and teeth together and kept perfect silence.

Not one of them uttered or would utter a word. They merely kept their big, black eyes fixed scornfully upon their captors and said nothing.

The two thousand dollars, in exactly the same bills as he received it, was discovered in the pockets of the chief, and that Nick took charge of, to return to the man to whom it belonged.

Still that yelling continued in the back room, and as soon as the capture was complete and the captives had been shackled so that there was no possibility of an escape, Nick burst open the door of that room and entered it.

All was dark in there, but he procured the lamp from the mantle and returned.

One glance at the bundle of filth and rags in the corner showed him the prisoner who had been so strangely abducted from the headquarters' cell—and he was still mad; mad and yelling with all his strength.

He had torn his clothing almost from his body, so that his breast was bare, and again Nick saw the sign of the crossed swords where it had been tattooed upon his skin.

Turning back into the other room he went to the chief, and said:

"It puzzled us to know why you took all that trouble to rescue a crazy man, but we know now why you did it. You did it because he is a descendant of one of the old families of Italy, and because you were compelled to do so by your oaths. Perhaps he was the next beneficiary under your oath; was he?"

The chief only glared his reply. He did not speak at all.

When, at three o'clock that morning, Nick Carter told the inspector about it all, over the telephone, he added:

"Antonio de la Vuelta is back in his cell, and the men who rescued him are in other cells, but we are only at the beginning of the mystery, which I propose to solve at once—the mystery of the Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords."

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 403, will contain "The Brotherhood of the Crossed Sword; or, The Little Giant's Mighty Task." In this story you will find revealed the inner secrets of one of the great Italian secret societies. Chickering Carter, the editor of this series, is so familiar with the ins and outs of Nick's work among the Italians, that the story will be a revelation to you.

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